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Jason McKrindey Coates
Virginia Commonwealth University

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TIMES NEW ROMAN

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

JASON COATES

Bachelor of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1999

Director: RICHARD ROTH
CHAIR, PAINTING AND PRINTMAKING

Director: PETER BALDES
DIRECTOR GRADUATE STUDIES, PAINTING AND PRINTMAKING

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May, 2007

Acknowledgement

This Thesis is dedicated to my wife Kerrie, whose selflessness has been the most important factor in my development as an artist. Several years ago, we were living in a cramped studio apartment in the D.C. area and I was using the dining room/kitchen as a studio. A visitor surveyed the mess that had started to take over half of the apartment and remarked, “Kerrie, you are a very patient woman.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” I responded.

Also, I’d like to thank the members of my committee, among others. Barbara for her kind words and encouragement; Peter for his one on ones; and Richard for the unvarnished truth.

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Abstract

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It is difficult to say that anything will be proven in this thesis of mine. I think of it more as an account of some things that happened in my artwork over the course of graduate school and my earlier development as an artist. Some influences are listed, but certainly not all of them. Likewise, the work that is mentioned in this paper represents a sampling rather than an in-depth survey. I don't have any tables or charts.

Introduction

My application to graduate school, written in early 2005, contained the following statement: “I’m not sure what shape my work will take over the next two years, and I find this to be very exciting.” Change has been the one consistency throughout my time here. It had to be- I came into grad school with a deep, if vague, dissatisfaction with my work. And now, I look back at the last two years as a series of experiments- some leading to dead ends, some not.

I’ve often felt that writing a statement about my work is a lot like doing a detailed drawing of a passing car. It’s hard to get anything nailed down on paper. Maybe that’s a good thing. At the Jerry Saltz lecture, he asked (I’m paraphrasing), if the artist has his/her work figured out, then what do we need the viewer for? I agree. And not just because it (sort of) lets me off the hook when it comes to critically defending my work. Now, I view art making as a mostly intuitive affair and something to be defined after it’s made. I didn’t always. In this paper, I intend to discuss my influences, background, and process. And, perhaps most importantly, I want to talk about the gradual shift in my view of art as product of ideas, to art as generator of ideas.

The Big Four

Every painting that I've made in recent years can be traced back to the influence of these four men: Glen Baxter, Peter Blake, George Grosz, and John Wesley. With the exception of Wesley, I found out about these artists early on at crucial times in my development. On the surface, they have quite a bit in common with each other. Blake, Baxter, and Wesley are stereotypical postmodernists. And Grosz is associated with Dada, which is often thought of as the premature postmodern art movement that occurred before modernism reached a crescendo. Most interesting to me, however, is how each of these four defies categorization. Following are a few words about each of the four, listed in the order that each artist came to my attention.

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George Grosz

My aim is to be understood by everyone. I reject the 'depth' that people demand nowadays, into which you can never descend without a diving bell crammed with cabbalistic bullshit and intellectual metaphysics. This expressionistic anarchy has got to stop... a day will come when the artist will no longer be this bohemian, puffed-up anarchist but a healthy man working in clarity within a collectivist society. 1

-George Grosz

The above statement by Grosz is hardly in line with the writings of Clement Greenberg or any other modernist for that matter. In fact, it is shocking how postmodern it is (minus the bit about “a collectivist society,” of course). “An artist working *within* society?” Such cynicism and anti-intellectualism. Perhaps this is what drew me to George Grosz’ drawings shortly after I learned about him during an Art Survey course in my second year as an undergraduate. At the time, I was considering becoming an illustrator, and I had never seen draftsmanship that represented a perfect blending of the hand and the

mechanical, the geometric and the organic. His paintings-especially the cubist ones-seemed to anticipate digital space and resembled the visual language of video games that I played as a child.

And the ugliness- what is it about the Germans and their need to depict the ugly? I'm not sure who is portrayed less favorably in the painting, "Winter's Tale," the three evil authority figures at the base, or the fat, cow-eyed factory worker that is the painting's center. It is Grosz' evenhandedness that I find most appealing about this work.

If Grosz did have an agenda during the Weimar year leading up to Hitler's rise, that agenda quickly gave way to almost complete Nihilism in the post World War Two period.

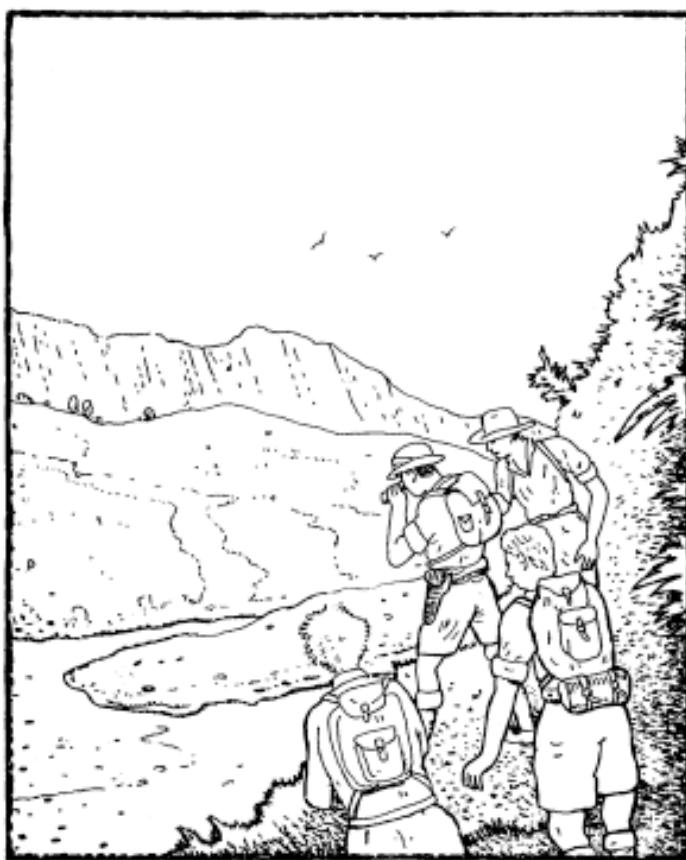


George Grosz, "Painter of the Hole 1," 1948

He began his "Painter of the Hole" series in the late '40s. This work, even though it was brought about by horrible circumstances, is the work that I find most appealing. Near-hollow stick figures (thought to be based on photos of Holocaust victims) sit in ruins and paint holes. One can't get much more grim and absurd than that. Still, there are moments

of beauty and humor in the work. In the above painting, I've always found the small photo or study of the hole above the painting itself to be a hilarious detail. And the ever-present Grosz draftsmanship- the figure itself contains such fluidity and character for such a minimal thing.

Glen Baxter



"I'M AFRAID IT LOOKS LIKE
ANOTHER MASSIVE, OVERCOOKED
OMELETTE!" BARKED SNODE

Cartoon by Glen Baxter

I'd like to start out with a quote from Glen Baxter, but I can't find one that would be even remotely illuminating. In fact, it seems that every statement uttered by Baxter is, just like his cartoons, designed to throw us off his trail. He has devoted his entire artistic career to his specific brand of nonsense, and his work has changed very little in thirty years.

With Baxter, there is always an absurdity in detail. Admirals with dog tails making appearances alongside grim-looking men wearing wimples. When I view a Baxter cartoon, my imagination is activated. I've often said that I want my paintings to be viewed as vignettes- inexplicable glimpses into complex plots that are carrying on without our participation. This is something that I learned from Baxter.

I first found out about Baxter while at the Public library looking through comic book anthologies. I was in my early twenties, and working on a degree in the Communication Arts Department with an emphasis on editorial illustration. After stumbling upon Welcome to the Weird World of Glen Baxter, I started thinking about a career track change. I decided I wanted to be a cartoonist-- a next generation Baxter.

The following year, I had graduated and was living in the D.C. area trying to build an illustration portfolio. In addition, I was trying to peddle a single panel comic that I called "Heinrich Hosana's Educated Fleas." I sent twenty panels, packed up neatly in manila envelopes, to various syndicates around the country. After several months of waiting by

the phone, I heard back from just one syndicate via the mail. It was a short note on the back of one of the cartoons that said “Thanks, Jason. You are obviously a big fan of Glen Baxter.” That was it.

In retrospect, the comic was pretty rough and needed a ton of work. But it taught me a great lesson in perseverance.

Heinrich Hosana’s Educated Fleas

Jason Coates

in emphasis between “Only a *few* good apples were left out of the entire bushel” and “*Several* good apples were left.” *Various* refers mainly to things that are not alike: *various* duties. ♦ See LESS.

fez [fez] *n.*, *pl.* **fez-zes** A felt cap worn by Egyptian men and formerly by Turkish men, usually red and having a black tassel.

ff. Abbreviation of *and those that follow*. Pages 56 *ff.* means page 56 and following pages.

fi-an-cé [fē/ān-sā'] *n.* A man to whom a woman is engaged to be married.

fi-an-cée [fē/ān-sā'] *n.* A woman or girl to whom a man is engaged to be married.

fi-as-co [fē-as'kō] *n.*, *pl.* **fi-as-coes** or **fi-as-cos** A complete or humiliating failure: The hoarse singer's recital was a *fiasco*.

fi-at [fī'at] *n.* An official order: decree.



A FEZ

J Coates

As a dictionary model, he was known for being somewhat of a showboat.

A sample from "Heinrich Hosana's Educated Fleas," Jason Coates, 1999-2000

Peter Blake

"I used the device of looking both down and across at the picture mostly for convenience- if you are painting a sheet of paper on the ground with someone standing next to it, perspective is going to be involved and it's going to be difficult. The device I used gives a very odd effect- you look straight across at the Grosz yet perspective is implied in certain places." 2 -Peter Blake



Peter Blake, "On the Balcony," 1955-7

The above statement was taken from an interview of Peter Blake discussing his first major work, "On the Balcony." The work was completed while Blake was attending the Royal College of Art. It was also the first painting that I had ever encountered of his (again, thumbing through a art survey book in the public library), and I was stunned. As an undergraduate, I had always heard people discuss painting as image versus painting as object. "On the Balcony" made me understand the difference, mainly because of its simultaneous existence as both image and object. A tremendous fan of pop culture, Blake treated his paintings like corkboards ready to be filled with tacked-on memorabilia.

There was something that always bugged me about painters like Degas, who treated themselves as flies-on-the-wall waiting to capture their subjects in private moments. Blake's work is the antithesis of this candid effect. Usually composed and staring straight-ahead, his subjects know that they are in a painting, and are sometimes caught mugging for the viewer.

Early in his career, Blake made two paintings based on carnival posters entitled "*Loelia, Worlds Most Tattooed Lady*," and "*Siriol, She-Devil of Naked Madness*." Part aged, parlor room relics and part contemporary, hand-painted pop, the works inspired me to start a series of my own. At the time, I was also looking at various images of the Vaudeville period and I came across a poster that announced the arrival of "Nat Braham's Educated Fleas." The image was hilarious: tiny, black dots on tiny bicycles, lifting glasses of water, and walking miniature tightropes while balancing with toothpicks. I stole the "Nat Braham's" title (which I eventually changed to "Heinrich Hosana") and made my first painting of the series: "*Mlle Elmina, the Lady Who Was Borne on Plates*." The attempted dry humor, shallow perspective, and worn-out appearance of the surface show Blake's influence. (After completing six or so paintings of the series, I decided it worked better as a comic strip, see above).



Jason Coates, "Mlle. Elmina: The Lady Who Was Borne on Plates," 1999

John Wesley

John Wesley, Night Titanic, 1984

“Once, I said to my wife Hannah that Bumstead was like my father. He wore a hat and brought the newspaper when he came home from work. I think he took lovely conveyances like Bumstead did. But, I don’t think there was much else in common. I don’t think my

father was like Bumstead. Nevertheless, I have built on Bumstead since then because I like to play with how it sounds. It's a fun association." ³ *-John Wesley*

My favorite series of Wesley's is his *Searching for Bumstead* of 1973-4. In the group of paintings, Wesley depicts the Dagwood Bumstead household- the armchair, the bed, the front stoop- minus the people. Wesley's father died abruptly when he was six years old, so there has been much speculation about Bumstead representing him. As the above statement indicates, Wesley neither confirms nor (really) denies.

In truth, I doubt Wesley has given it much thought. From what I've read about him, he doesn't engage in too much navel staring. Yet, in my opinion, his paintings are remarkably elegant and complex. Wesley sets himself up as a conduit through which contemporary culture is channeled through his subconscious. The resulting paintings blend the best parts of pop and surrealism.

And when asked to explain his work, he often replies, "Oh, I just traced it," or something equally as curt. In fact, Wesley often cuts himself off or backtracks before he notices himself sounding "too eloquent."

Introduction Number Two

A week ago, about one month before my first round thesis show will be hung at the Anderson Gallery, I decided that I wanted to start from scratch. The reason that I don't want to use any of my older (yet very recent) work is partly out of a general dissatisfaction with the way that I've been working recently. Graduate school has been a series of shifts for me, from periods of play and experimentation to times where I paint according to a plan. Recently, I had just finished a wallpaper-like painting of rows of corn with superimposed angry eyes. The same ear rendered over and over. By the time I was finished, not only was I tired of the painting, but also every bit of the humor that I had originally hoped for when I made the sketch had been squeezed out. I always say that my work flirts with failure in the same way that slapstick humor is hit-or-miss. And when I looked at this painting, the only phrase that came to mind was "way too silly."

Not that there is anything wrong with silly. I will always have a soft spot for silly and it will always be a part of my work. But with that particular painting on that particular day, I felt like I had crossed some sort of line.

These are the things that I was thinking about when I went to the Polly Apflebaum lecture later that week. My ears perked when she mentioned the animator Chuck Jones and his set

of rules and guidelines for the Roadrunner series (Two examples: “The Coyote can only be harmed by Acme Products or himself,” and “the Roadrunner must always stay on the road”). We seldom think of something as intuitive as humor benefiting from guidelines but it suddenly made perfect sense. I decided that I would try to think of my work in terms of following a set of rules.

Shortly thereafter, I decided on the “Three Objects” idea. My rules for a new series of work would be simple, and allow for a great deal of wiggle room:

1. The work must contain three distinct elements. No more or less.
2. At least one of the elements must be a painting.

I am excited about these guidelines for the simple fact that it allows me to turn the painting into a player that interacts with other objects in ways that I’m still dreaming up. If you think about the Marx Brothers (or today’s equivalent, “Aqua Teen Hunger Force”), each individual had a distinct role. Groucho was the structure; Harpo was the nonsequitor, and so on.

The First of the Series



I have included the above image not because I feel it is a strong work by itself (I have decided not to use it in the Thesis Show), but because it serves as a good example of the “Three Objects” idea. Here you have three distinct elements: a vignette painting of an oasis, an orange ball, and red tape in the form of an “x”. The painting acts as the structure or support, and the other two elements are “on” the painting in contrasting ways. The orange ball is on the painting as object, and the “x” is on the painting as illusionary surface. In a conversation with visiting curator Lynne Cook, she mentioned that it was, for

her, about the “gravitational pull of representation” as each of the other two objects become yanked into orbit.

In another work, (the only work from the series that I am including in the thesis show), the painting does not act as the structure or support. Rather, it is an optical illusion interacting with or being undermined by the other two objects.

All in all, I am pretty excited about this series even though some bugs need to get worked out.

On Paper

When I wrote “Introduction #2,” I was fully intending for my Thesis show to be mostly comprised of work from the “Three Objects” series. In addition, I was going to include one or two works on paper. As it turns out, the works on paper have taken on a life of their own and will make up the bulk of the show.

I find that the works on paper come more naturally to me, as I am probably more of a draftsman than a painter. In contrast with the “Three Objects” series, there are no rules for making the work. They are as much doodles as anything else. But it is amazing to me how much information and surprise you can pack into a doodle.

I suppose I could write my entire thesis about why I'm attracted to the future-as-imagined-from-the-past quality of 1950's sci-fi comics. But in reality, I haven't the slightest idea what brings me to this imagery other than the fact that I'm a product of a shared popular culture. In addition, I don't place any grand implications behind the subject matter. The drawings aren't intentionally post-apocalyptic or post-human though if they end up having that quality, then so be it. I guess in this sense I am of the "art tells us more than the artist" school of thought.

What I do intend is for the imagery to have a lightness, mystery, and humor that functions in subtle ways and on different levels. As it turns out, working on white paper with flashe paint and airbrushed acrylic may just be the best way for me to get that across. Kind of funny to me that I'm now- at this late stage in grad school- starting to push this combination of materials, but so it goes.

Narrative

One of the things that I wanted to do away with when I started graduate school was my use of narrative as a basis for the paintings. This was a huge tool to take away for me, since all of my work previous to 2005 was illustrative of an invented storyline. I wanted the images to stand on their own, to be self-referential.



“Painter and Loid Struggle for Soul Control,” 2001, Trenton Doyle Hancock,

When I first came across the above painting by Trenton Doyle Hancock I was blown away. That is, until I found out that it was part of a not-so-compelling ongoing narrative about two godlike figures named “Painter” and “Loid.” Why did he have to slam the book shut by prescribing meaning? I liked it so much more when I was baffled.

Still, there has to be a middle ground. Maybe a reference to narrative without a narrative itself. Someone like John Wesley is great at providing hints at a plotline without giving too much away. He understands the painter’s power to capture sublime humor by isolating specific moments. I want my work to do this, too. To read like glimpses into a story that is going on without our awareness or participation.

My Largest And Most Ambitious Work To Date



The above work soars to exactly nine feet and towers over everything else that I've made. It was created in response to several suggestions that I make "big" work. But I took it a step further. In addition to being a large work itself, it is a work that makes me, the artist, taller as I stand next to it (seven foot two inches to be exact). A connection has been made

to Duchamp's "Standard Stoppages" work, but I like the work as a commentary on ambition.

Conclusion

The past two years have been beneficial for me on many levels. I have learned much about the contemporary art world—I felt like I was always playing catch up on that front, since my background is in commercial art. Before grad school, I worked alone and practically nobody saw my work until it was shown somewhere. Now, I've become quite comfortable with studio visits. And most importantly, I enjoy thinking about the people that I've met over the last couple years. No matter where we all end up, some keeping in touch, some not, we will always have VCU MFA in common.

All in all, the art world is a lot smaller and less scary to me than it was two years ago. For now, my plans are to move to New York. For the first time in my life, this idea seems feasible. I'm viewing my thesis show not as a grand climax, but as a point of departure. An exciting idea, since I know my best work lies ahead of me.

Thanks everybody!

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VITA

Jason Coates was born in the Commonwealth of Virginia to Diane Wind Marie and Dale McKrindey in June 1975. He weighed eight pounds four ounces and the doctor mentioned that he had a “strong grip.”